These lectures are an attempt to revive an old subject. I need spend no time, I think, in describing the present state of Rhetoric. Today it is the dreariest and least profitable part of the waste that the unfortunate travel through in Freshman English! So low has Rhetoric sunk that we would do better just to dismiss it to Limbo than to trouble ourselves with it—unless we can find reason for believing that it can become a study that will minister successfully to important needs.

Rhetoric should be a study of misunderstanding and its remedies. . . . [Rhetoricians sometimes] claim that Rhetoric must go deep, must take a broad philosophical view of the principles of the art, but nothing of the sort is attempted. What we are given instead is a very ably argued and arranged and discussed collection of prudential Rules about the best sorts of things to say in various argumentative situations, the order in which to bring out your propositions and proofs and examples, at what point it will be most effective to disparage your opponent, how to recommend oneself to the audience, and like matters. As to all of which, it is fair to remark, no one ever learned about them from a treatise who did not know about them already; at the best, the treatise may be an occasion for realizing that there is skill to be developed in discourse, but it does not and cannot teach the skill.

[Richards declares that the old macroscopic rhetoric must be supplanted by a microscopic inquiry.] To account for understanding and misunderstanding, to study the efficiency of language and its conditions, we have to renounce, for a while, the view that words just have their meanings and that what a discourse does is to be explained as a composition of these meanings—as a wall can be represented as a composition of its bricks. We have to shift the focus of our analysis and attempt a deeper and more minute grasp and try to take account of the structures of the smallest discussable units of meaning and the ways in which these vary as they are put with other units. Bricks, for all practical purposes, hardly mind what other things they are put with. Meanings mind intensely—more indeed than any other sorts of things. It is the peculiarity of meanings that they do so mind their company; that is in part what we mean by calling them meanings! In themselves they are nothing—figments, abstractions, unreal things that we invent, if you like—but we invent them for a purpose. They help us to avoid taking account of the peculiar way in which any part of a discourse, in the last resort, does what it does only because the other parts of the surrounding, uttered or unuttered discourse and its conditions are what they are. "In the last resort"—the last resort here is mercifully a long way off and very deep down. Short of it we are aware of certain stabilities which hide from us this universal relativity or, better, interdependence of meanings. Some words and sentences stillmore, do seem to mean what they mean absolutely and unconditionally. This is because the conditions governing their meanings are so constant that we can disregard them. So the weight of a cubic centimeter of water seems a fixed and absolute thing because of the constancy of its governing conditions. In weighing out a pound of tea we can forget about the mass of the earth. And with words which have constant conditions the common sense view that they have fixed proper meanings, which should be learned and observed, is justified. But these words are fewer than we suppose. Most words, as they pass from context to context, change their meanings, and in many different ways. It is their duty and their service to us to do so. Ordinary discourse would suffer anachronism if they did not, and so far we have no ground for complaint. We are extraordinarily skillful in some fields with these shifts of sense—especially when they are of the kind we recognize officially as metaphor. But our skill fails; it is patchy and fluctuant; and, when it fails, misunderstanding of others and of ourselves comes in.

A chief cause of misunderstanding, I shall argue later, is the Proper Meaning Superstition. That is, the common belief—encouraged officially by what lingers on in the school manuals as Rhetoric—that a word has a meaning of its own (ideally, only one) independent of and controlling its use and the purpose for which it should be uttered. This superstition is a recognition of a certain kind of stability in the meanings of certain words. It is only a superstition when it forgets (as it commonly does) that the stability of the meaning of a word comes from the constancy of the contexts that give it its meaning. Stability in a word's meaning is not something to be assumed, but always something to be explained. And as we try out explanations, we discover, of course, that—as there are many sorts of constant contexts—there are many sorts of stabilities. The stability of the meaning of a word like knife, say, is different from the stability of a word like man in its technical use, and
then again both differ from the stabilities of such words, say, as event, ingestion, endurance, recurrence, or object, in the paragraphs of a very distinguished predecessor in this Lectureship. It will have been noticed perhaps that the way I propose to treat meanings has its analogues with Mr. Whitehead's treatment of things. But indeed no one to whom Berkeley has mattered will be very confident as to which is which.

I have been suggesting—with my talk of macroscopic and microscopic inquiries—that the theory of language may have something to learn, not much but a little, from the ways in which the physicist envisages stabilities. But much closer analogies are possible with some of the patterns of Biology. The theory of interpretation is obviously a branch of biology—a branch that has not grown very far or very healthily yet. To remember this may help us to avoid some traditional mistakes—among them the use of bad analogies which tie us up if we take them too seriously. Some of these are notorious; for example, the opposition between form and content, and the almost equivalent opposition between matter and form. These are wretchedly inconvenient metaphors. So is that other which makes language a dress which thought puts on. We shall do better to think of a meaning as though it were a plant that has grown—not a can that has been filled or a lump of clay that has been moulded. These are obvious inadequacies; but, as the history of criticism shows, they have not been avoided, and the perennial efforts of the reflective to amend or surpass them—Croce is the extreme modern example—hardly help.

More insidious and more devastating are the oversimple mechanical analogies which we have brought in under the heading of Associationism in the hope of explaining how language works. And thought as well. The two problems are close together and similar and neither can be discussed profitably apart from the other. But, unless we drastically remake their definitions, and thereby dodge the main problems, Language and Thought are not need I say—one and the same. I suppose I must, since the Behaviorists have so loudly averred that Thought is subvocal talking. That however is a doctrine I prefer, in these lectures, to attack by implication. To discuss it explicitly would take time that can, I think, be spent more fruitfully. I will only say that I hold that any doctrine identifying Thought with muscular movement is a self-refutation of the observationalism that prompts it—heroic and fatal. And that an identification of Thought with an activity of the nervous system is to me an acceptable hypothesis, but too large to have interesting applications. It may be left until more is known about both; when possibly it may be developed to a point at which it might become useful. At present it is still Thought which is most accessible to study and accessible largely through Language. We can all detect a difference in our own minds between thinking of a dog and thinking of a cat. But no neurologist can. Even when no cats or dogs are about and we are doing nothing about them except thinking of them, the difference is plainly perceptible. We can also say "dog" and think "cat."

I must, though, discuss the doctrine of associations briefly, because when we ask ourselves about how words mean, some theory about trains of associated ideas or accompanying images is certain to occur to us as an answer. And until we see how little distance these theories take us they are frustrating. We all know the outline of these theories: we learn what the word "cat" means by seeing a cat at the same time that we hear the word "cat" and thus a link is formed between the sight and the sound. Next time we hear the word "cat" an image of a cat (a visual image, let us say) arises in the mind, and that is how the word "cat" means a cat. The obvious objections that come from the differences between cats; from the fact that images of a grey persian asleep and of a tabby stalking are very different, and from some people saying they never have any imagery, must then be taken account of, and the theory grows very complex. Usually, images get relegated to a background and become mere supports to something hard to be precise about—an idea of a cat—which is supposed then to be associated with the word "cat" much as the image originally was supposed to be associated with it.

This classical theory of meaning has been under heavy fire from many sides for more than a century—from positions as different as those of Coleridge, of Bradley, of Pavlov and of the gestalt psychologists. In response it has elaborated itself, calling in the aid of the conditioned-reflex and submitting to the influence of Freud. I do not say that it is incapable, when amended, of supplying us with a workable theory of meaning; in saying that simple associationism does not go far enough and is an impediment unless we see this, I am merely reminding you that a clustering of associated images and ideas about a word in the mind does not answer our question: "How does a word mean?" It only hands it on to them, and the question becomes: "How does an idea (or an image) mean what it does?" To answer that we have to go outside the mind and inquire into its connections with what are not mental occurrences. Or (if you prefer, instead, to extend the sense of the word "mind") we have to inquire into connections between events which were left out by the traditional associationism. And in leaving them out they left out the problem.

For our purposes here the important points are two. First, that ordinary, current, undeveloped associationism is ruined by the crude imposable physical metaphor of impressions stamped on the mind (the image of the cat stamped by the cat), impressions then linked and combined in clusters like atoms in molecules. That metaphor gives us no useful account either of perception or of reflection, and we shall not be able to think into or think out any of the interesting problems of Rhetoric unless we improve it. Secondly the appeal to imagery as constituting the meaning of an utterance has, in fact, frustrated a large part of the great efforts that have been made by very able people ever since the 19th Century to put Rhetoric back into the important place it deserves among our studies. . . .

It is no exaggeration to say that the fabrics of all our various worlds are the fabrics of our meanings—the formations and transformations of mean-
ings which we must study with and through words... Whatever we may be studying we do so only through the growth of our meanings. To realize this turns some parts of this attempted direct study of the modes of growth and interaction between meanings, which might otherwise seem a niggling philosophic juggle with distinctions, into a business of great practical importance. For this study is theoretical only that it may become practical.

I have been leading up—or down, if you like—to an extremely simple and obvious but fundamental remark: that no word can be judged as to whether it is good or bad, correct or incorrect, beautiful or ugly, or anything else that matters to a writer, in isolation. That seems so evident that I am almost ashamed to say it, and yet it flies straight in the face of the only doctrine that for two hundred years has been officially inculcated—when any doctrine is inculcated in these matters. I mean the doctrine of Usage. The doctrine that there is a right or a good use for every word and that literary virtue consists in making that good use of it.

“The Interanimation of Words,” from The Philosophy of Rhetoric (1936).

I have urged that there is room for a persistent, systematic, detailed inquiry into how words work that will take the place of the discredited subject which goes by the name of Rhetoric. This inquiry must be philosophic, or—if you hesitate with that word, I do myself—it must take charge of the criticism of its own assumptions and not accept them, more than it can help, ready-made from other studies. How words mean is not a question to which we can safely accept an answer either as an inheritance from common sense, that curious growth, or as something vouched for by another science, by psychology, say—since other sciences use words themselves and not least delusively when they address themselves to these questions. The result is that a revived Rhetoric, or study of verbal understanding and misunderstanding, must itself undertake its own inquiry into the modes of meaning—not only, as with the old Rhetoric, on a macroscopic scale, discussing the effects of different dispositions of large parts of a discourse—but also on a microscopic scale by using theorems about the structure of the fundamental conjectural units of meaning and the conditions through which they, and their interconnections, arise.

In the old Rhetoric, of course, there is much that a new Rhetoric finds useful—and much besides which may be advantageous until man changes his nature, debates and disputes, incites, tricks, bullies and cajoles his fellows less.

Aristotle's notes on the forensic treatment of evidence elicited under torture are unhappily not without their utility still in some very up-to-date parts of the world.

From The Philosophy of Rhetoric (1936), Lecture II.
Among the general themes of the old Rhetoric there is one which is especially pertinent to our inquiry. The old Rhetoric was an offspring of dispute; it developed as the rationale of pleadings and persuasions, it was the theory of the battle of words and has always been itself dominated by the combative impulse. Perhaps what it has most to teach us is the narrowing and blinding influence of that preoccupation, that debaters' interest.

Persuasion is only one among the aims of discourse. It poaches on the others—especially on that of exposition, which is concerned to state a view, not to persuade people to agree or to do anything more than examine it. The review and correspondence columns of the learned and scientific journals are the places in which to watch this poaching at its liveliest. It is no bad preparation for any attempt at exposition, to realize how easily the combative impulse can put us in mental blinkers and make us take another man's words in the ways in which we can down him with least trouble. [Richards introduces his “context theorem of meaning” to support the argument that purposes determine discourse. The most important element of the theorem—Richards follows Coleridge in using this term instead of idea—is the premise that “meanings, from the very beginning, have a primordial generality and abstractness.” He covers much of the same ground as that explored in “Realism/Nominalism/Conceptualism” (Interpretation in Teaching) (see chapter 14) before turning to meaning as “delegated efficacy,” an attempt to avoid simple-minded conceptions of representation.]

I must explain now the rather special and technical sense I am giving to this word context. This is the pivot point of the whole theorem. The word has a familiar sense in a literary context, as the other words before and after a given word which determine how it is to be interpreted. This is easily extended to cover the rest of the book. The familiar sense of context can be extended further to include the circumstances under which anything was written or said, wider still to include, for a word in Shakespeare, say, the other known uses of the word about that time, wider still finally to include anything whatever about the period, or about anything else which is relevant to our interpretation of it. The technical use I am going to make of the term context is none of these—though it has something in common with them as having to do with the governing conditions of an interpretation. We can get to it best, perhaps, by considering those recurrences in nature which statements of causal laws are about.

Put very simply, a causal law may be taken as saying that, under certain conditions, of two events if one happens the other does. We usually call the first the cause and the second the effect, but the two may happen together, as when I clap my hands and both palms tingle. If we are talking about final causes we reverse them, and the lecture you are going to hear was the cause of your coming in at the lecture, you are going to hear was the cause of your coming at the lecture, and the one which comes from the different purposes for which we need causal laws.

We decide, to suit these purposes, how we shall divide up events; we make the existence of the earth one event and the tick of a clock another, and so on. And we distribute the titles of “cause” and “effect” as we please. Thus we do not please to say that that night causes this or that; we prefer to say that the condition of the rotation of the earth is the cause of the earth's movement. We are especially arbitrary in picking out the cause from among the whole group, or context, of conditions—of prior and subsequent events which hang together. Thus the coroner decides that the cause of a man's death was the act of a murderer and not the man's meeting with the murderer, or the stopping of his heart, or the fact that he was not wearing a bullet-proof waistcoat. That is because the coroner is interested in certain kinds of causal laws but not in others. So here, in sketching this causal theorem of meaning, I am interested only in certain kinds of law and am not necessarily saying anything about others.

Now for the sense of context. Most generally it is a name for a whole cluster of events that occur together—including the required conditions as well as whatever we may pick out as cause or effect. But the modes of causal recurrence on which meaning depends are peculiar through that delegated efficacy I have been talking about. In these contexts one item—typically a word—takes over the duties of parts which can then be omitted from the recurrence. There is thus an abridgement of the context, shown only in the behavior of living things, and most extensively and drastically shown by man. When this abridgement happens, what the sign or word—the item with these delegated powers—means is the losing parts of the context.

If we ask how this abridgement happens, how a sign comes to stand for an absent cause and conditions, we come up against the limits of knowledge at once. No one knows. Physiological speculation has made very little progress towards explaining that, though enormous strides have been made this century in analysing the complexities of the conditioned reflex. The shift, the handing over, is left still as inexplicable. Probably this “learning problem” goes down as deep as the nature of life itself. We can suppose, if we like, that some sorts of residual effect are left behind from former occurrences which later cooperate with the sign in determining the response. To do so is to use a metaphor drawn from the gross behavior, taken macroscopically, of systems that are not living—printed things, gramophone records and such. We can be fairly ingenious with these metaphors, invent neural arches storing up impressions, or neural telephone exchanges with fantastic properties. But how the arches get consulted or how in the telephone system A gets on to the B it needs, instead of to the whole alphabet at once in a jumble, remain utterly mysterious matters. Fortunately linguistics and the theory of meaning need not wait until this is remedied. They can probably go much further than we have yet imagined without any answer to this question. It is enough for
our purposes to say that what a word means is the missing parts of the contexts from which it draws its delegated efficacy.

At this point I must remind you of what I said a few minutes ago about the primordial generality and abstractness of meaning and about how, when we mean the simplest-seeming concrete object, its concreteness comes to it from the way in which we are bringing it simultaneously into a number of sorts. The sorts grow together in it to form that meaning. Theory here, as so often, can merely exploit the etymological hint given in the word “concrete.” If we forget this and suppose that we start with discrete impressions of particulars (“fixities and definites” as Coleridge called them) and then build these up into congeries, the theorem I am recommending collapses at once into contradictions and absurdities. That was the fault of the old Hartleian Associationism: it did not go back far enough; it took particular impressions as its initial terms. But the initial terms for this theorem are not impressions; they are sortings, recognitions, laws of response, recurrences of like behaviors.

A particular impression is already a product of concrescence. Behind, or in it, there has been a coming together of sortings. When we take a number of particular impressions—of a number of different white things, say—and abstract from them an idea of whiteness, we are explicitly reversing a process which has already been implicitly at work in our perception of them as all white. Our risk is to confuse the abstractness we thus arrive at intellectually with the primordial abstractness out of which these impressions have already grown—before ever any conscious explicit reflection took place.

Things, in brief, are instances of laws. As Bradley said, association marries only universals, and out of these laws, these recurrent likenesses of behavior, in our minds and in the world—not out of revived duplicates of individual past impressions—the fabric of our meanings, which is the world, is composed.

So much for the theorem. What are the problems we must use it to construct?

Since the whole business of Rhetoric comes down to comparisons between the meanings of words, the first problem, I think, should be this: How, if the meaning of a word is, in this sense, the missing parts of its contexts, how then should we compare the meanings of two words? There is opportunity for a grand misunderstanding here. It is not proposed that we should try to make these comparisons by a process of discovering, detailing, and then comparing these missing parts. We could not do it and, if we could, it would be a waste of time. The theorem does not pretend to give us quite new ways of distinguishing between meanings. It only bars out certain practices and assumptions which are common and misleading.

The office of the theorem is much more negative than positive; but is not the less useful for that. It will not perhaps tell us how to do much that we cannot do without it already; but it will prevent us from doing stupid things which we are fond of doing. . . .

The context theorem of meaning would prevent our making hundreds of baseless and disabling assumptions that we commonly make about meanings, oversimplifications that create false problems interfering with closer comparisons—and that is its main service. In this, it belongs with a number of other theorems which may be called policeman doctrines—because they are designed on the model of an ideal policeman force, not to make any of us do anything but to prevent other people from interfering unduly with our lawful activities. The organization of impulses doctrine of values for literary criticism is in the same position. These policeman doctrines keep assumptions that are out of place from frustrating and misleading sagacity. . . .

Preeminently what the theorem would discourage is our habit of behaving as though, if a passage means one thing it cannot at the same time mean another and an incompatible thing. Freud taught us that a dream may mean a dozen different things; he has persuaded us that some symbols are, as he says, “overdetermined” and mean many different selections from among their causes. This theorem goes further, and regards all discourse—outside the technicalities of science—as overdetermined, as having multiplicity of meaning. It can illustrate this view from almost any of the great controversies. And it offers us—by restraining the One and Only One True Meaning Superstition—a better hope, I believe, of profiting from the controversies. A controversy is normally an exploitation of a systematic set of misunderstandings for warlike purposes. This theorem suggests that the swords of dispute might be turned into ploughshares; and a way found by which we may (to revert to Hobbes) “make use of our benefit of effects formerly seen—for the commodity of human life.”

2. The next problem concerns what happens when we put words together in sentences. At least that is a common way of stating it. The theorem recommends us rather to turn the problem round and ask what happens when, out of the integral utterance which is the sentence, we try to isolate the discrete meanings of the words of which it is composed. It is in sentences and the interaction between words in the sentence that the most deep-rooted, systematic and persistent misunderstandings arise.

A third set of problems concerns rivalries between different types of context which supply the meaning for a single utterance. These start with the plain equivocation—as when the word “reason” may mean either a cause or an argument. I am simplifying this here to make it a type of a really simple ambiguity. Actually in most occurrences it would be much more complex and not so easily cleared up, as the shifting meanings of “cause” and “argument” themselves show. The context theorem of meaning would make us expect ambiguity to the widest extent and of the subtler kinds nearly everywhere, and of course we find it. But where the old Rhetoric treated ambiguity as a fault in language, and hoped to confine or eliminate it, the new Rhetoric sees it as an inevitable consequence of the powers of language and as the indispensable means of most of our most important utterances—especially in Poetry and Religion.
Of course ambiguities are a nuisance in exposition as, in spite of my efforts, you have certainly been feeling. But neutral exposition is a very special limited use of language, comparatively a late development to which we have not (outside some parts of the sciences) yet adapted it. This brings me to those large-scale rivalries between contexts which shift the very aims of discourse. When the passions—the combative passion and others—intervene, either in the formation of an utterance or in its interpretation, we have examples of context action just as much as when the word “paper,” says, takes its meaning from its contexts. The extra meaning that comes in when a sentence, in addition to making a statement, is meant to be insulting, or flattering, or is interpreted so—we may call it emotive meaning—is not so different from plain statement as we are apt to suppose. As the word means the missing part of its contexts and is a substitute for them, so the insulting intention may be the substitute for a kick—the missing part of its context. The same general theorem covers all the modes of meaning.

I began by speaking of the poaching of the other language functions on the preserve of pure exposition. Pure exposition has its guardian passions no doubt—though I do not know their names. But they are not often as strong as the poachers and are easily beguiled by them. It has been so necessary to us, especially since the physical basis of civilization became technical, to care at least sometimes for the truth only and keep the poachers sometimes out, that we have exaggerated enormously the extent of pure exposition. It is a relatively rare occurrence outside the routine of train services and the tamer, more settled parts of the sciences. We have exaggerated our success for strategic reasons—some of them good, because encouraging, if we do not too much hoodwink ourselves. (I have aimed at points to be merely expository in these remarks, but I know better than to suppose I have succeeded.) We shall find, preeminently in the subject of rhetoric, that interpretations and opinions about interpretations that are not primarily steps of partisan policy are excessively hard to arrive at. And thereby we rediscover that the world—so far from being a solid matter of fact—is rather a fabric of conventions, which for obscure reasons it has suited us in the past to manufacture and support. And that sometimes is a dismaying rediscovery which seems to unsettle our foundations...

Facts are no true comforts until we know how to take them; and that is just our problem. They are further items in configurations which we have to learn to understand. This observation long ago gave us our saying about the wood and the trees. There is indeed something reminiscent of the labors in the Wood in much contemporary scholarship. They wandered up and down and to and fro. They went everywhere but out of the wood and were found in the morning (there was a morning!) under a heap of leaves. The story says that pitying birds buried them so. This seems a pretty fancy. I find it more likely that they collected these leaves themselves and perished through unregulated interest in the variety of foliage.

In less legendary language we do not develop a mind by giving it more facts but by helping it to judge relevance. It is relevance which tells us which meanings belong with which, and in what configurations, for a valid interpretation. The way to strengthen the sense of relevance is by exercising it with simpler problems rather than by adding elaborations.